

THE GRAY COLLIE

By Georgia Wood Pangborn

ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. SHERMAN POTTS.



HE steam had retired, clanking, from the radiator, withdrawing to the cellar like the dragging chain of Marley's ghost. The blue flame of a Bunsen burner was the only light and heat left. Now and then the wind flung handfuls of spiteful sleet at the window.

"I don't know anything about ghosts," said Henrietta, plaintively. "I'm as bad in psychology as mathematics. I might tell about the gray collie, but he was real. Don't let that chocolate boil over, Isabel."

Isabel poured out three steaming cups, thick and sweet, for in the young twenties and late teens the appetite is still bizarre.

"I'll tell it as it happened," sighed Henrietta. "I don't believe I could make anything up to save my neck."

She was small and sad-eyed, with a timid manner, and sat on a wolf-skin, leaning one elbow on its head, which had green eyes of sinister slant, and bristling ears.

"You know who Artaxerxes was?"

"Artaxerxes," they recited, "was your old wolf-hound who was really benevolent, but everybody was afraid of him, and when he wagged his tail it waved like a cat's, sinuously, instead of swinging in a clubby, careless way, as a dog's should."

"He was white with gray spots," mused Henrietta; "I suppose his family in Siberia looked like that to match the snow when they went out hunting, and he was shaggy and soft."

"We chained him the night the circus came to town. He heard a lion roar as the train went by at three o'clock, and, at first, I thought we had another lion in the barn. Gracious! If he hadn't been chained he would have been over the wall and chased that lion to the station."

"I went down to soothe him and see if his chain had given in any of its links. I never saw him so out of temper. Finally he consented to lie down, though he grumbled about it, and the tip of his tail kept twitching, not wagging. He hardly ever wagged it."

"He worried all that day. 'Don't you know there are bears and lions and tigers and wolves out there?' he'd say—'Isn't it my business to protect you from such things? Do let me go and kill a few. I'll come right back!'"

"We supposed he would stop worrying when the circus went, but instead, he got worse. He explained how it was his business to find out what had become of all those animals. In the evenings, as soon as

he was unchained, he would march up and down inside the wall, holding his nose to the wind and every now and then making a low impatient sound in his throat, as if he were worried about something and making plans.

"One morning Farmer Grosman came to our house, very fierce: 'Your dog's been killing my sheep.' We explained that he never got over the six-foot wall, but nothing would do. If he hadn't done it, who had? If we did not shoot him, he would, and so on.

"Papa was very polite. He said he regretted that he could allow no shooting on the place except what he did himself. 'You are certainly entitled to shoot any dog or dogs which you may discover molesting your sheep, and I shall exercise the same prerogative in protecting my dog.'

"He said it with that deprecating smile of his—I believe he smiled deprecatingly when he got cut off from his men at Antietam, and fought his way out of a lot of rebels who tried to make him prisoner. He hated Grosman, who was the meanest man in town and starved his horses.

"The man went off growling, and said he'd see the Mayor. We chained Artie up that night. In the morning we found his cat, dead, with a half-eaten piece of poisoned meat beside it. Artie thought everything of that cat. He had carried it around in his mouth ever since it was a little kitten. He always had to have his cat, the way a child has to have a doll. Any other cat he'd have sighted half a mile away and chased. But that one was his own, and anything it did was all right. It's all in being acquainted. Papa sat up all the next night with a shot-gun. We heard that the people from the French quarter of the village insisted that Artie got over the wall at night and roamed around and got into mischief. They said they heard him howling up on Mount Phelim, and talked a great deal about what they were going to do to him and us. Those Canucks would have it that he was a man-wolf, and could change about from one thing to another. You can't argue with them when they get a notion like that.

"One morning Pete Lancto, who mows the lawn, said he had seen the devil, and that he was like a shaggy dog.

"'Probably it *was* a dog!' I said. But

he told a lot of lies about smelling brimstone and flames coming out of its eyes.

"I said 'I guess you were *tenet*' (that's their word for 'tight').

"But he hadn't touched a drop, and had only been to get a new salt codfish at the store.

"'Well, anyway, if it smelt brimstone, it wasn't Artie.'

"But that idiot said: 'The devil, he can smell brimstone when he wants to—*je pense que oui!*'

"So I let him alone. You can't argue with a man who hasn't any premises to argue from.

"It was my work to go to the village for the mail. I went after supper, about sunset, or a little later.

"The road curves along the side of Mount Phelim, which is not much of a mountain, but rather too big for a hill. When you look south it is as if the trees stood on each others' heads, and there are wide, open spaces, like a park, so that you can see between the trunks, only by the road the underbrush is thick like a hedge. But on the north side of the road you don't want to tumble off, for the Powasket runs below, hidden under the tops of trees, so that you only know it's there from the sound. When I was little, I used to be afraid of that road, because a Canuck nurse-girl had scared me with stories of bears and catamounts and Indians.

"That was why papa had me go for the mail. He never could stand cowards. At first he used to sneak along behind me, and when I got hysterical would saunter up as if he were just out for a walk, and show me how pretty the sunset was over toward Canada, or cluck for squirrels to come out and see what we wanted, or take me up into the woods a little to find Indian pipes like caryatides holding up dead leaves. So it wasn't very long before I grew to love the walk, and the sound of the wind in the trees, even when it was dark. I got quite friendly with the squirrels, and used to leave little piles of nuts as I went to the village, and when I came back they would be all gone. There aren't many squirrels up there that can afford pecans and Brazil-nuts. I suppose they wondered till their heads ached, why I left them around so carelessly.

"But when I grew to like it at night,



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papa began to object. A good many times when I've been sitting on the edge of the road swinging my feet over the Powasket, watching the last color going out beyond Canada, and listening to the owls and frogs and things, he has come to meet me and grumbled about 'going to extremes.' But I had him, you see, and only laughed. Hadn't he trained me to it?

"So about that time he got me Artaxerxes for a chaperone, and he was good deal of a nuisance, for the village folk disliked him from the first. When they whistled to their own dogs to get them out of his way, how could he tell they weren't calling to him? And when he'd turn to see what they wanted, they'd think he was coming after them and run, which was nonsense.

"We were keeping Artie chained that week of the sheep-killing fuss. How he hated it! When I stepped upon the horse-block to mount Pixie—I rode most of that week, and he knew I never took him when I took Pixie, because he had a nasty way of snapping at her nose, not meaning any-

thing, but it got on her nerves dreadfully—and when I mounted Pixie and shook my crop at him, he would stand up at the end of his chain, his fore paws beating the air and his tongue hanging out, because he was choking himself so hard, and I've often thought he looked more unattractive that way with his one head than any picture of Cerberus with three.

"It was particularly hard on him now that his cat was dead. We had got him a new kitten, but it wasn't broken in yet, and couldn't understand that he didn't mean anything when he carried it around in his mouth.

"It was that evening that I saw the gray collie the first time. There were long streaks of late sunlight reaching up into the mountain, and he was so mixed up in the light and shadow that it was only by chance I saw him at all, he was so like the tree trunks and boulders: but he happened to be in a place that I knew all about, because it was where papa and I had often sat, and I knew no gray patch of anything belonged

just there. It was like finding an animal in one of those old puzzle-pictures, where they're all mixed up in the branches.

"I reined up and whistled, and called him every name I could think of, but he did not stir, so that I almost thought my eyes were wrong after all; but there was no mistaking those pointed ears cocked toward me. I thought he might be the sheep-killer, though he was such an aristocratic creature, for what can you expect of a dog that's lost and hungry and unhappy? I'd probably steal something myself if I felt that way. I knew that nobody in our part of the country owned such a dog as that, and I wondered if his master were dead up there on the mountain. There are so many queer accidents—but it was the close season. The more I wondered, the queerer it seemed.

"All of a sudden, Pixie snorted and plunged so that I was almost thrown, for I wasn't expecting it, and was leaning over with a loose rein and my arm out toward the collie. I had trusted that mare like my own sister, and had believed her a sensible soul, but she never stopped until she reached the barn, sweating and trembling like anything.

"I was so out of patience that I left her at home with Artie the next time I went for the mail. I planned as I went through the woods how I would make the collie's acquaintance and bring him home, and how he and Artie would strike up a friendship. They were both such splendid fellows and so lonely. I thought a good deal about it, how I'd manage, for I knew that if I wasn't careful they'd be more likely to kill each other first—like Balin and Balan, you know—and make up afterward.

"I didn't meet the collie until I was coming back. It was twilight, and the moon was rather narrow to see by. There was a rustle and snapping in the bushes at the side of the road.

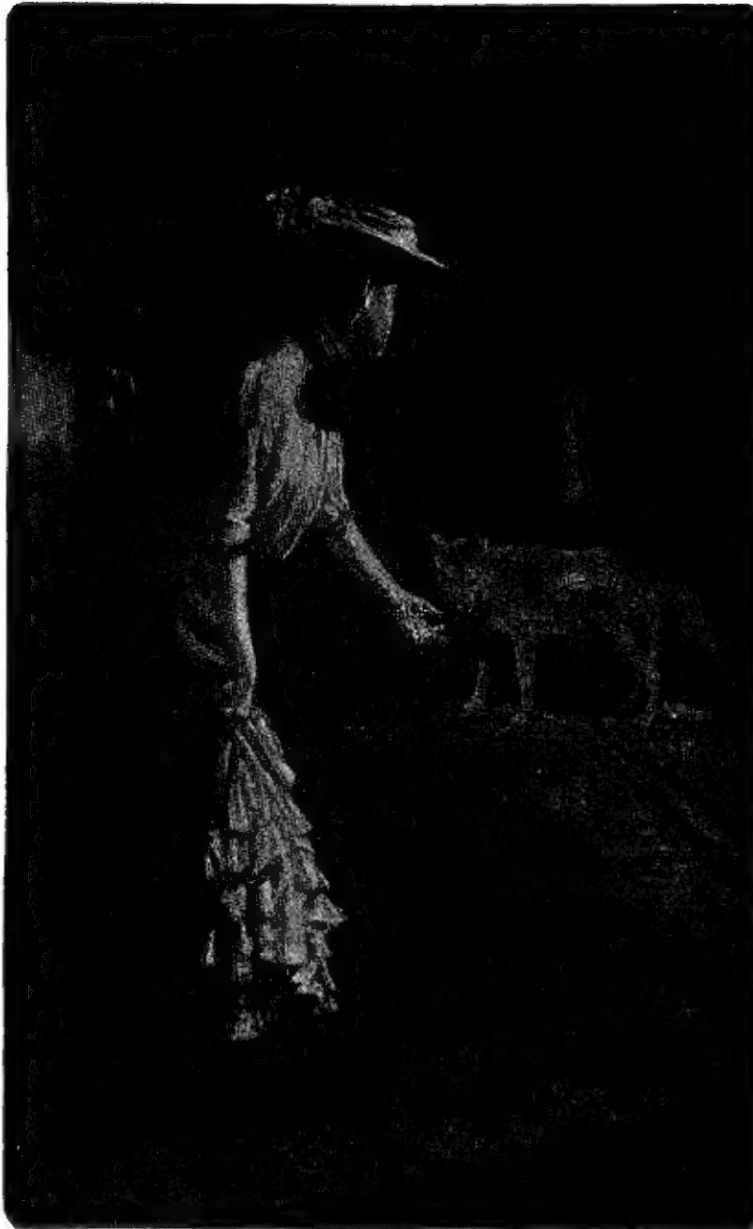
"'Nice fellow!' I said, and stopped. I could make out the silhouette of his ears cocked toward me, and a little glimmer where his eyes were. 'Poor old chap,' I said, 'did you lose your folks?' But he wouldn't say a word, and backed off when I went toward him, so finally I went on, hoping he would follow, and he did, but silyly, so I could hardly be sure it was he, keeping beside me in the underbrush.

"When I reached the open, and looked back, he was standing in a faint patch of moonlight, in the middle of the road, looking after me with his head down a little, something the way people look at you under their eyebrows when they're trying to understand.

"I whistled and called, but it was no use. He stood there as long as I did, and I finally went on without him. But I couldn't get him off my mind. It seemed such a wild, lonesome life for a dog that must have been brought up in a pleasant home, with regular meals and a fireplace to lie in front of, and probably a girl like me to take him walking. And it seemed as if it must be something queer and tragic to send him off that way by himself. I thought more and more how some young fellow might be lying dead up there on the mountain. I made up a whole story about it that evening. And that night I dreamed I had the collie and found a collar hidden in his ruff, and was trying to read his name on it—but you know how hard it is to read anything in a dream; you look at a letter and it changes to something else, or dances off to one side. Then he seemed to be telling me a long story, the way animals do in dreams, but when I woke up it turned into nonsense.

"I knew he would meet me the next evening, and so I took some of Artie's dog-biscuit with me, and while the collie padded along the other side of the bushes, tried to reach some through to him, but he wouldn't touch it, though once he sniffed a little very daintily, and then blew out his breath as dogs do when they've found out all they want to know about a smell. He kept right beside me. As we neared the opening he grew bolder, frisked across the road in front and came up from the other side. As I pretended to pay no attention, he came close behind and touched my elbow, hardly enough to say so, but I felt his breath warm through my sleeve.

"When I came out into the open moonlight he stood as he had before at the edge of the woods, and watched me out of sight. I couldn't believe that he was the sheep-killer, he seemed so gentle and timid, but I didn't dare speak of him to anyone—it would have seemed like betraying a trust—for I knew that in other people's minds, if they found out that he was there, it would lie between him and Artie, and as Artie was



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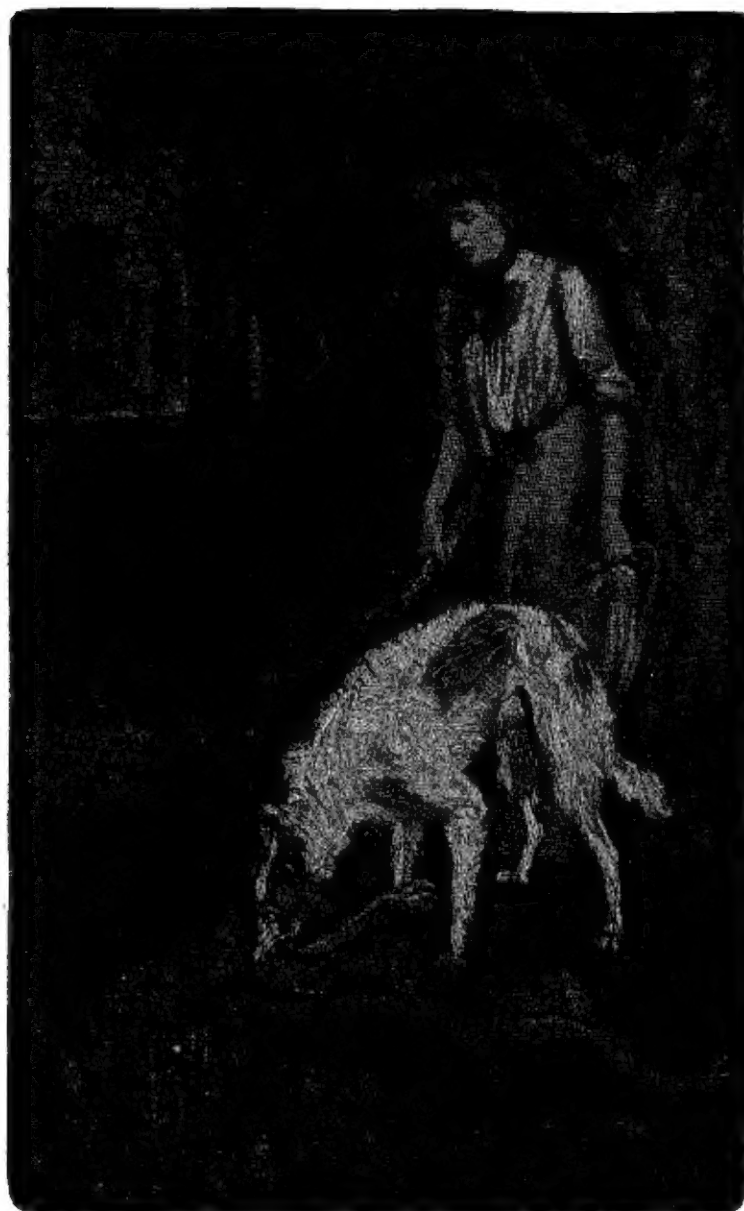
out of the question, they would take it out in killing the collie anyhow. I felt something the way Southern girls do in novels, when they're hiding a handsome Union soldier.

"The next evening I started as usual, but just as I got to the woods, Artie came tearing after me, dragging a yard of chain and pretending he thought I wanted him! I could have slapped him, but took it out in being sarcastic, with words he couldn't understand, and hitched his chain to my

belt, so that if he started to be impolite to the other fellow, I could have something to say about it.

"We reached the post-office safely enough, but I was glad he was tight to my belt, for some rough men looked at us in that ugly, suspicious way and said 'sheep-killer' once or twice, and 'loup-garou.' So I really felt safer when we reached the woods, in spite of dreading the meeting between Artie and the collie.

"But I didn't hear or see anything of him



I didn't even try to pull Artie away when he got the other fellow by the throat.—Page 101.

until we were half-way through, and then, so far off it might have been on top of the mountain, I heard him howl—not exactly a howl, but a queer cry, as if he were calling to something at a distance, kind of sorrowful, but fierce, too. It went down my back like a chip of ice—but I'd hardly heard it when Artie roared in answer, and I was being carried up that mountain at the end of his chain like a cart after a runaway horse.

"And I had thought I could hold him! Gracious! I tried to catch at the branches,

but they broke. We went through a patch of black-berries, and there was a mucky little spring, where I fell in the mud and scared the frogs, and I think it must have been half-way up Phelim, where I finally caught tight hold of a tree-trunk and my belt broke and Artie went on as if he didn't know the difference. I don't know how long it was before I got my breath and began to think. Then I heard them—away off at the top, the frogs singing between as peaceful as could be—but I heard that wicked snarling and knew they were at it—

Balin and Balan—and that they were so well matched it was likely to be the death of both, unless I could stop it. I followed the sound and climbed after, though I was all weak and trembling. You can see on my hands now how the thorns had scratched, and my clothes were heavy and sticky with mud. It seemed ages before I got there. I think I was crying.

"I knew I couldn't do anything, but I picked up the heaviest stick I could find, though all the sticks you can pick up in the woods are as rotten and light as powder. They didn't seem to know I was there. They were in a little open space, and the moonlight lit up their eyes now and then. I could see that the collie was a more tremendous fellow than I had thought—and then—all of a sudden—I knew!

"And because I knew I didn't even try to pull Artie away when he got the other fellow by the throat, and held him down, while he got weaker and weaker. I looked at him there in the moonlight, and cried, and wondered how I'd been so stupid.

"While I sat there wringing my hands and waiting for Artie to let go, some men came up and turned a bull's-eye lantern on me, and seemed so astonished they couldn't do anything but swear, though each would try to shut the other up, now and then, saying there 'was a lady present.'

"One of them seemed to think it was

funny, and explained what they had said to each other, the way people always do for animals or babies. 'Siberian wolf and Siberian wolf-hound! Must 'a seemed kin' o' natural for them fellers to meet up. "Beg pardon," says the wolf, "ain't I seen you before?"—and says the pup, "I don't know, but you're certainly the chap my mammy told me to lick if ever I come acrost you, and, by thunder, I'll do it!" Which he did. Will you be so kind, Miss, when your little terrier there has quite finished, to call him off? It'd be rayther indelicate for a stranger to interfere.'

"The other man seemed sorry. 'Nothing left but his pelt, which is some chewed, but could be mended up into a real elegant rug, which the young lady might be pleased to accept.'

Henrietta thoughtfully scratched the ears of the rug, and ran her fingers over the rows of beautiful teeth. "This is the collie."

"But sometimes I wonder just what he had in mind when I felt his breath on my elbow. Most people would say that he was thinking how convenient I would be some evening when no sheep was handy, but I'm not sure. At the time I supposed he was sad and lonesome, and glad of my company. A wolf, after all, is a good deal of a person. He was so frightfully solitary, you see—nobody to answer his gathering cry—half a world away from his own people."